



**Testimony of:**

**James E. Shmerling, DHA, FACHE President and CEO of Connecticut Children's  
Alice Forrester, PhD- CEO of Clifford Beers Community Health Partners  
Galo Rodriguez, MPH- President and CEO of The Village for Families and Children**

**to the Appropriations Committee regarding HB 6659- *An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025 and Making Appropriations Therefor***

**February 28, 2023**

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit our joint testimony regarding HB 6659-*An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025 and Making Appropriations Therefor*.

**James E. Shmerling, DHA, FACHE President and CEO of Connecticut Children's**

My name is Jim Shmerling and I have the pleasure of serving as Connecticut Children's President and CEO.

Last year, state legislators demonstrated an unprecedented prioritization of children's behavioral health through bipartisan legislation which implemented new programs, initiatives, and critical investments in children's care. Despite these positive steps, we know that the children's behavioral health system has been overburdened and under-resourced for decades and the current moment requires bold leadership in support of our kids' futures.

The resources we invest in children are just that—an investment. The care we provide for children early in life is critical and will have lifelong implications for their physical health and emotional wellbeing. By investing in our youth and advancing policies that support their health, we strengthen families, communities, and the state's future workforce. Investing resources now will result in significant returns in the future.

In recent years, Connecticut Children's has seen an unparalleled number of children seeking care from our health system, and particularly in our emergency department, with behavioral health concerns. Our busy emergency department illustrates the broader challenges facing the children's behavioral health system, and more specifically the lack of investment in community level services. The state's behavioral health ecosystem is built on a foundation of community services which was showing cracks before the pandemic. Now, after nearly three years of increasing demand, those of us who make caring for kids our mission seek your partnership to strengthen that foundation.

At Connecticut Children's, we feel this acutely in our emergency department. Delays in discharge most often result from the inability to obtain timely access to the next appropriate level of care for patients. The true problem we face is one of "throughput" because there are numerous barriers that prevent the unencumbered flow and access to services. All too frequently, our team of social workers and physicians are unable to find appropriate available services for these patients. These care delays impact children at all levels of system—from

those who might be unable to find a therapist willing to take new patients, to those requiring respite or residential treatment, to those in need of intensive home-based intervention.

To that end, it is critical that state leaders make strategic investments at all levels of the pediatric behavioral health system, as all are currently understaffed and overburdened. A significant piece of that burden is insufficient Medicaid rates. Pediatric providers, including Connecticut Children's, are deeply challenged by rates which fall far below the cost of providing care. We look forward to partnering with state leaders in search of sustainable solutions and increased investment across the children's behavioral health care continuum to support children before they reach a crisis stage and require emergency-level care.

That is why Connecticut Children's, Clifford Beers Community Health Partners, and The Village for Families and Children have chosen to partner and submit joint testimony to the committee. We are united in our support for increased investment in children's mental health because it is the right thing for families and because of the true interconnectedness of the system. We must think more holistically and fund the entire continuum rather than piecemeal components in isolation. When parts of a system are strained, these challenges reverberate and impact us all. The status quo is simply not providing children and families with the care they deserve.

#### **Alice Forrester, PhD- CEO of Clifford Beers Collaborative Care Center**

I testify today on behalf of Clifford Beers Community Health Partners. Our organization is an integrated network of affiliated nonprofits that deliver wraparound mental health and social services to Connecticut children and families. We aim to improve outcomes, simplify access to services, and ensure that every individual and family in the communities we serve has equitable access to the high-quality mental health and community services that they need to live healthier and better lives.

We believe strongly that no one should be denied healthcare for any reason, including their health insurance status. Accordingly, **our affiliates provide accessible mental health care, regardless of ability to pay or access to insurance, and we are predominately serving folks on HUSKY.** Last year, Clifford Beers Community Health Partners affiliates provided care to over 7,500 children and their family members, and reached over 2,000 community members through professional development trainings and classroom screenings.

**Demand for Clifford Beers' wraparound mental health and social services increased dramatically** during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet state support has failed to keep pace with these rising needs and costs, which leave our programs operating at a perpetual deficit that we must continually seek to fill from other sources. Our waiting list grows, in particular for autism services and intensive outpatient programs, both of which are desperately needed to reduce the Emergency Department Backlog. It is very difficult to grow services or create models of innovation when we are trying hard to manage day to day costs as well as inflation.

I am here to request that you increase funding for community nonprofits during the biennium by 9% in FY24, the first year, and 7% in FY25, the second year, and to index future increases to inflation. This funding is crucial to honoring your long-term plan to increase funding for community nonprofits because it makes up for the high inflation nonprofits have experienced over the last two years. The increases the legislature provided in the last biennium were deeply appreciated by nonprofits across the state, but programs and services funded by Medicaid did not receive the same level of increase.

Instead, some Medicaid-funded services like clinic-based behavioral health services received only a 4% increase in FY22. While state-funded contracted services received an increase each year of the last biennium, the 5.4% Cost of Living Adjustment in the current year (FY23) was not applied to Medicaid rates. It is unfair and unjust to expect the children's mental health system to deal with the severe mental health crisis without adequate support.

**Galo Rodriguez, MPH- President and CEO of The Village for Families and Children**

First, I want to thank the General Assembly – especially members of this committee - and the Lamont Administration for passing legislation last year that addresses the state's mental health crisis. Because of your leadership The Village is about to open one of the state's first Urgent Care Crisis Centers and Sub-Acute Stabilization Centers. Children and adolescents coping with trauma will now get the help they need in a timely manner, and more appropriate setting than a hospital emergency department.

The next state budget must maintain this investment and allocate additional support for non-profit agencies, like The Village, who play a critical role in helping Connecticut's children recover from the pandemic and thrive.

The increased funding for non-profits in the last state budget made a significant impact in our ability to attract and retain clinicians. Flat funding in this coming biennial budget would be a step backwards and make it impossible to meet the growing demand for mental health services. We've come this far, and I urge you to pass a budget that keeps our promise to families in Connecticut and funds the vision that you set forth in last year's landmark legislation.

If you have any questions about this testimony or would like to get in touch with anyone from Connecticut Children's, Clifford Beers, or The Village, please contact Connecticut Children's Government Relations Manager, Emily Boushee, at [eboushee@connecticutchildrens.org](mailto:eboushee@connecticutchildrens.org).